

August 5, 1998

Utah Department of Health, Bureau of Epidemiology
Foodborne Outbreak Investigation Guidelines

The purpose of these guidelines is to outline the role of the Local Health Departments (LHDs), the Utah Department of Health (UDH), and the Utah Department of Agriculture and Food (UDAF), for foodborne disease outbreak investigations. A foodborne outbreak is an incident in which two or more persons experience a similar illness after ingestion of a common food which has been implicated as a likely source of their illness by epidemiological analysis. Laboratory and epidemiological support for foodborne outbreak investigations will be provided by the Utah Department of Health for these situations.

Outbreaks involving a single household usually preclude making epidemiologic associations with particular food exposures. The Division of Epidemiology and Laboratory Services will not, with few exceptions, conduct testing of clinical or food items from these incidents. Exceptions include a single case of suspected botulism or food-related poisoning such as paralytic shellfish poisoning, or an unusually severe illness in several members of a household requiring hospitalization. As always, staff from the UDH are available to consult regarding requests for laboratory testing in individual situations.

Local Health Departments

The LHD has primary responsibility for investigating foodborne outbreaks within its jurisdiction and will:

- Keep a log of all complaints regarding food products and/or food establishments, to recognize trends that may lead to an outbreak.
- Collect preliminary information on outbreaks and report to the UDH, Bureau of Epidemiology, Communicable Disease Control Program by telephone within 24 hours. Local health officers are responsible for keeping the Bureau of Epidemiology informed of each investigation and proposed public communications.
- Coordinate with the UDH, Bureau of Microbiology for availability of analytical services, as well as the type and quantity of samples to be collected.
- Investigation of an outbreak will begin within 24 hours of reporting to the UDH. Outbreak investigations will include an appropriate epidemiologic questionnaire administered to all exposed persons and the collection of clinical specimens and food specimens.
- The preparation, handling, and shipping of samples are the responsibility of the LHD. These steps must be carried out in a manner that will assure the biological integrity of the samples,

and show proof that an appropriate chain of custody of the samples has been maintained. Coordinate with the UDH, Bureau of Microbiology on the proper collection, handling, and shipping techniques for samples.

- Laboratory testing of food specimens is contingent upon the laboratory results of clinical specimens, the epidemiologic analysis, and the HACCP inspection. LHDs are encouraged to consult with the Bureaus of Epidemiology, Microbiology, and Food Safety and Environmental Health on each of these steps.
- If a LHD finds it is not able to completely comply with R386-702 (Communicable Disease Rule), the assistance of the UDH will be requested by the local health officer. In such circumstances, the LHD will provide all required information to the UDH, Bureau of Epidemiology. If the local health officer fails to comply with the provisions of R386-702, the UDH will take action necessary to enforce this rule.

The UDH, Bureau of Food Safety and Environmental Health

Outbreak investigations at food service establishments will include a Hazard Analysis of Critical Control Points (HACCP), assessment of personal health and hygiene habits of all employees, and any other assessments of general sanitation and maintenance that are appropriate. The LHD is encouraged to consult with the Bureau of Food Safety and Environmental Health during this process.

The UDH, Bureau of Epidemiology

The Bureau of Epidemiology will coordinate and/or conduct the investigation of outbreaks involving multiple jurisdictions, or which otherwise represent a statewide threat.

- The Bureau of Epidemiology will report outbreaks to the local health officer as soon as possible. When the Bureau of Epidemiology is notified of an outbreak during holidays, weekends, and after working hours, this will be reported to the local health officer on the next working day unless an emergency response is appropriate.
- The Bureau of Epidemiology will notify other local health departments about outbreaks that may impact other parts of the state or create media interest. As previously stated, the local health officers are responsible for keeping the Bureau of Epidemiology informed of each investigation and proposed public communications.

The UDH, Bureau of Microbiology

The Bureau of Microbiology will provide assistance and information in the following areas:

- Appropriate samples for collection and analysis.
- Specimen collection techniques and procedures.
- Specimen container types.
- Specimen handling and shipping to the laboratory.

The Bureau of Microbiology will analyze samples which have been linked via epidemiological analysis and/or HACCP assessment. Test results associated with an outbreak will be reported to the lead agency coordinating the investigation and the Bureau of Epidemiology.

The Utah Department of Agriculture and Food

The UDAF has a regulatory authority and will be responsible for raw agriculture food products and commercially prepared products. Food establishments under inspection by UDAF include: bakeries, grain processors, grocery stores, fish and meat departments, warehouses, food processors, and bottled water and water vending machines.

- The LHD will coordinate and have the lead responsibility of investigating and controlling foodborne outbreaks within their jurisdictions. However, when outbreaks are associated with a raw agriculture product, commercially prepared food, or meat product, the LHD will immediately notify the UDAF.
- The UDAF will be the lead agency in conducting inspections at those establishments that are under its jurisdiction. When an outbreak occurs, the UDAF will participate in the sampling of food manufactured or processed in those establishments that are under its jurisdiction. This will help ensure that the chain of custody is maintained.
- The UDAF will report all foodborne illness cases that it is made aware of to the appropriate local or state health department for investigation. The UDAF will handle complaints of commercially processed food products, except where illness has resulted from the consumption of these products. In these cases the LHD will serve as the lead agency.

The lead agency in investigating an outbreak will prepare the final report and send it to the other appropriate agencies within sixty (60) days after the end of an outbreak.